

Return to Office Is Like Returning From Deployment (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Welcome to Work Better a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. We reached out to today's guest – Lt. Col. Adria Horn – after reading an article she contributed to in McKinsey. It's called "A Military Veteran Knows Why Your Employees Are Leaving." Adria serves in the US Army Reserve and is executive vice president of workforce at Tilson Technology Management. She comes to us with a very unique perspective and draws interesting parallels between returning to the office and returning from military deployment.

After we chat with her, we'll be joined by Nadia Johnson, director of Leadership and Adaptive Teams at Steelcase. Nadia will help us think through how Adria's ideas can be applied to our day-to-day work. So stay with us for that.

Adria is joining us today from Maine and I'd like to say welcome and thank you for your service, Adria.

Adria Horn: Thank you Chris. I appreciate it. I'm really excited to be here.

CC: I think it would be really helpful for everybody to understand a little bit about your military background and then also your role today at Tilson Technology Management and how you see those two things intersecting.

AH: I have been in the military officially now for 21 years. It feels crazy to even say it out loud. I went to West Point, graduated in 2001 in June, when there wasn't a lot happening in the world. And in September all of that changed. So I would say my entire military career was completely based on the attacks on the World Trade Center — completely based on what happened and on 9/11 and everything after that that followed. I was commissioned as a military police officer. I deployed three times as a military police officer and then I switched to what's called psychological operations while I was in Afghanistan on my third deployment. I stayed on active duty for just about 11 years and had five total deployments in that timeframe. Now I'm an instructor, which is great. I love being able to instruct majors, for the commanded general staff officers college, as a reservist right now. So I've been connected to the military for what feels like longer than half of my life. Which, if you had asked when I was 18 what that would look like, this is not what I would have told you.

CC: Yeah, that is an amazing background. And now at Tilson.

AH: And now at Tilson, right. I would say my military experiences were hyper condensed, too. So I had like an entire career's worth of experiences in a 10-year timeframe. It was very intense and condensed and so when I left active duty, I was not looking for that at all. My husband and I decided to move to Maine. We found a house – just moved to Maine. We said, "we've done harder things." I didn't have a job. We didn't know people from here. And we made the move and it's been great. It's been the best move. I credit him with that decision — I'm not sure I would have made it on my own.

So I started working for Senator Susan Collins for a little bit and then ended up getting appointed by the governor, running the main Bureau of Veteran Services. It was in that position that I was doing a lot of outreach to veterans and I did some outreach to my now CEO, Josh Broder, who had won Maine Business Leader of the Year and I just said, "Hey you're a veteran. I'm a veteran. You hire veterans. We should talk." And we did and eventually it led to this role that I have now at Tilson, which is sort of like an HR function. I'm the Executive Vice President of Workforce, but it really involves safety, marketing, communications, and HR through a talent team. Really in the military construct, he wasn't looking for an HR partner — he was looking for an executive officer. He's like, "I kind of need this person, this function, and I know somebody who knows what that means intuitively." So it was actually a really excellent partnership and I've been at Tilson now for about four years.

CC: That's great. So, you contributed to an article that we found fascinating when we saw this and it was a McKinsey piece titled, "A Military Veteran Knows Why Your Employees are Leaving." So first of all, the title just was very catchy. How did you end up being part of that?

AH: Like everyone, we all went home. We did crisis leadership, crisis management during the pandemic and there's always a honeymoon period in crisis. Everybody sort of bonds together and then you figure something out. There's a lot of understanding. There's a lot more empathy and the entire pandemic was a crisis but you didn't know when it was going to end or what it was going to be like. As it started, however, we all went home, went to work from home, but also had to manage people who were working in the field, making sure that they were safe or able to do their work safely. It felt to me like in the pit of my stomach, I felt like I was deployed again. And I couldn't actually articulate that at first. I was like, "Man I feel I have felt this before. What is it that I have felt before because I'm working from home now? It's not something I've ever done before. What am I feeling?" and it started to really come together for me.

As I was getting tons of articles in the Facebook and LinkedIn newsfeeds, that started to identify this Great Resignation phenomenon with a name. First it was the phenomenon, and then it was all of the thought leadership pieces which were, employers don't know what their employees want, everybody's leaving because you've done so much crisis keeping trying to keep people safe in the best way possible and now they're leaving because you did something wrong. I just felt like those were such disconnected outcomes from the experience that you've had in a crisis that brings you together. Why now would you totally just leave? And for me, I remember coming back from life-changing deployment experiences and feeling different. And then feeling very disconnected from everything that happened at home, or remained at home, that I was putting some connections together, from my own personal experience as my own personal feelings, and seeing people not actually acknowledge that they, one, just went through a life-changing experience, they don't actually know how to process what just happened and the world wants to move on. And the one place that the world wants to move on is employment. Keep your job. Keep working. We've got to keep the economy going. How do those things come together?

I wrote to McKinsey that had this thesis, “Employers Don’t Know What their Employees Want,” and I said, “I have to tell you, I think you’re wrong and I think you’re wrong because employees actually don’t know what employees want because people don’t know what they want right now and that’s actually more important.” And having already been through 20 years of deployments and the tons of aftermath and mental health care that comes post-deployment for service members, guess what? I think the entire world is going to need this for at least the next 20 years. This is not a business problem. This is not because Amazon is a bad boss. This is because people are in a really, really tough spot right now and don’t know why.

CC: So can you tell us a little bit more about what you learned during your deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan that really helped you better understand this trauma? It feels different, but you’re making a really compelling connection here that I would have never thought about until I read your piece.

AH: So I think trauma ultimately is in the eye of the beholder. You may experience something traumatic very different than how I experience it and there’s a word floating out there that’s been very popular, which is resiliency, for a couple years. Which, what does resilience even mean? And my personal path from sort of identifying trauma to being resilient didn’t happen because my leg was blown up. It happened when I first got to West Point and I was in a totally different environment, getting yelled at thinking, “Why did I make this decision? How am I going to survive this event? I got to get myself together,” and all of the things that I didn’t anticipate in that moment are the things that rattled me the most and your resiliency is how you handle what you didn’t anticipate and then move forward. So for being deployed, there are things that you plan for. You know what the outcome is going to be because you know that death is the worst case scenario but is also expected. It would make sense if I was in an IED and had you know severe traumatic brain injury. It’s terrible, but it makes sense because I expect that that could be an anticipated outcome for me. What I didn’t anticipate was not having any type of food or water for a period of time. What I didn’t anticipate was actually not being able to talk to my family for six months straight. The things that I had planned for are not the things that rattled me — it was everything else that I didn’t plan for or anticipate that rattled me. And when you have that experience, it’s how you as an individual define what was traumatic for you and how you move on.

So while deployed, the entire experience was so different than anything I'd ever had before and each one was different that I became different after each experience, which is normal right? It is normal to become different and changed and grow after every experience. But I couldn't really identify how I was changing. I was less tolerant of people. I was more angry about certain things and people identify, these are very common and normal attributes. You have different perspectives. My perspective was about life or death. I didn't care about mundane activities anymore. I didn't care if my outfit didn't match or I didn't get flustered if my plane was delayed. Those things didn't matter to me anymore. So I became much more appreciative of the change process and I think employees in general can't identify this massive traumatic event that they have had no control over. And when trauma happens to you and you don't anticipate it. You don't have control over it. So, "My employer wants me to go back to work. Well I've been working at home fine. Why do I have to go back to work? Do you not trust me anymore? Why is this?" And they don't control it. So this lifeline, this difficult environment, people are scared. They're scared for their health. "How are you going to keep me safe? I feel like I'm immune compromised. I don't want to tell you everything about my life. It's highly politically charged. I don't want to tell you everything about my political affiliations and how I really feel." All of those things were so tightly, and I think are to some extent still tightly, tightly integrated, to the employee-employer relationship, and I think people just didn't even know how to articulate it, what to do with those feelings and just were like, "I've just had a life changing experience. I have a different perspective. I don't want to be tied or tethered to something that I can't control right now. I can't. I just can't. I'm gonna go do something totally different. Bucket list item. I'm going to spread those wings because they've been pinned and clipped for too long now."

CC: Yeah, that was something in your article that really resonated with me. The idea when somebody comes back from a deployment, sometimes they make major life changes. Like get married, get divorced or big, big changes. And given the trauma that people have been experiencing from living and working through the pandemic, do you feel like it's a good time to make major life changes? Or how would you coach people about that one?

AH: I have a colleague at work. He's so funny. He always says, "No one should ever make major life changes in March in Maine. It is the ugliest time of the year. You don't ever make a major life change – something will get better. You won't feel so gray and then with a clear head, you should make a major life change." So in the same vein, I don't think you should make a major life change. But that takes coaching and curating and somebody has to be in the moment of self-awareness to say, "Man I feel really different. This change is either something I can embrace and navigate, or I don't know how I feel so out of control I need to do the only thing I can control — which is a major life change. I'm going to sell my house. I'm gonna get in an RV. I'm going to work from home on the road. I'm going to see all the sites I haven't seen." You know, any number of things. And I will say this connects to grief, but not just the changes that happened in COVID. We had millions of people actually die. And every employee of an employer has and carries more actual grief in one period of time than ever before. The weight of grief on individuals in the world and in the office is heavier than ever before I think in modern history that we can even think back to. There is life-changing trauma that goes with not just coming back to the office, coming out of a pandemic, surviving for yourself, but the weight and the heft of the grief. "I didn't get to go to the hospital. I couldn't help my loved one." The powerlessness and the lack of control again for simple advocacy. "I couldn't even travel to say goodbye. I didn't have closure for a period of time for memorial services." Those are all open wounds and I think collectively, when I use the words trauma and grief, it's on a huge spectrum because it really is in the eye of the beholder, but it's all in the workplace. And we all process it differently. We process it at different times. I have been hyper experienced with this now. I don't process it in a delayed manner. I actually process it very quickly because I can make the connection for myself now. But if you've never had these before, you may not actually wrestle with the fact that you lost a loved one for another six months or a year. We are really going through these very differently even though we actually all went through this major life event at the same time.

CC: Your perspective I just find so helpful to helping me understand and think differently about the whole experience.

I'd like to know about Tilson, your organization now. I know the employees there have gone through a lot of changes and I think it's helpful to hear about what other organizations have experienced and there have been some changes you know that you've gone through there. Could you talk about that a little bit?

AH: We're a growth company and I joke what a growth company means isn't for an employee to think, "Oh there's lots of opportunity for growth here." What you should instead think is a growth company goes through growing pains and growing pains is figuring things out. There is opportunity for growth when you go through struggle and pain and you figure something else out and you're like, "oh I'm not going to repeat that again." There are a lot of opportunities for that. So our company, which builds information infrastructure, was really at the right place at the right time for a pandemic, and certainly post pandemic, for needing to build information infrastructure. So we're building information infrastructure that has really come out of the COVID demands of working from home and the understanding of the real separation of and digital equity issues for rural communities who don't have high speed internet access. So we've hired a lot of people in a short period of time. We're going into communities where we've never been before. We have people who are working from home and we've gone to a full work from home schedule. If you want to be in the office you can, you don't have to. And then we have people who are always in the field and in the present and together. It's a real spectrum of workers under the same umbrella with the same objective to support this mission of closing the digital equity divide.

So that comes with a lot of challenges and changes. And knowing that everyone's at a different spot in their life is really an issue for us to remember, for leaders to remember, for us to coach managers through. We've had a lot of turnover and we have people who have started and said, "I'm sorry I just can't continue working." And they'll say "I can't continue working here," and I interpret that as "I have a lot of other things going on and you're asking me to do something that I'm actually not ready to do yet, but I can't even tell you what that is." So I think we approach turnover from a different mindset and I really look at turnover as an opportunity to give somebody a chance to go and come back when the time is right. I don't think that's normal. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that is sort of normal. I hope it becomes a new normal that you have a chance to come back, because I think we will as people make a lot of mistakes and hold it over each other's heads, as just people, and be like, "oh I could never go back to that company. I left there in a huff and I pissed off my manager and all those things." I don't think we should hold those hard feelings. I think we should acknowledge them for what they really are — just a point in time of bad judgment because of bad experiences — and welcome people back when the time is right.

CC: I really like that way of thinking about it. Another thing I wanted to ask you about is something that you had told us — like this has got to be the best job title possibly in the world. I don't know whether I could do this job but I love the title and it's a Beast Counselor and I just am really interested in what is a Beast Counselor? What do they do? And why do we need Beast Counselors?

AH: Oh I really appreciate this question. So at West Point, they have a really interesting position and function where the summer is your cadet basic training. So any new cadet who comes in goes through this basic training period and the upper class cadets are the cadre. They are the squad leaders, the platoon sergeants, the company commanders first sergeants, and the entire summer is for the cadets going through it, but the cadre break it up into two sessions. So there will be a set of cadre for the first half of the summer and a complete cadre rotation for the second half of the summer, which is a very intentional and jarring experience for a new cadet who has finally gotten used to these people who are in charge of them and now you have a new supervisor who's yelling at you again and doesn't know you and it's very jarring. There is one position that doesn't rotate throughout the summer and every company has this one position which is a cadet counselor. Beast is the name that we call cadet basic training, so beast denotes that it's actually just the basic training period. So you're a beast counselor and you don't rotate. You're the only one. So there's eight companies and eight counselors who are with the new cadets and help the old and the new cadre transition and they can report to the company commander. They could go and report to an actual officer, not just a cadet cadre member and they can go anywhere. They can be on road marches and march with these cadets over here and they can go anywhere. And the whole point is to have a pulse of the organization to be a consistent face to be someone who's not in a leadership or a supervisory hierarchy who actually can have a psychologically comforting and safe environment to talk to somebody about what's going on. It's always occurred to me, because I served as a beast counselor for that summer — why don't we have beast counselors everywhere? Why isn't there one mission in organizations on this threshold where this person literally has no impact on your career. They have no impact on whether you're getting a promotion or not. They just help you. Which is very different from the HR function I think for some resolution, but this is a person who can just go right to the CEO and say, "Hey, I think you have a problem in this department. I think we should talk about this. This employee is having a hard time," and bring it some place. I think the flexibility, the autonomy and the opportunity for both an employer and an employee to have a facilitator is more important than ever before. So I recommend Beast Counselors everywhere.

CC: Yeah, I love it. I love it. I think that's a brilliant idea. Another thing I wanted to ask you about — and I was fascinated by you being a self-proclaimed proponent of radical self awareness and accountability — and first of all, I have always wondered, how does one actually know if they are self-aware? Because I just think to myself, "Well I think I'm self-aware," but maybe I'm just buying my own ideas about who I am and what I am. So I'm curious about that, but how do you think that people need to think differently right now in order to have a better work experience from what they have had?

AH: The article came out at the end of January 2022 and it had a lot of attention — I mean thousands of people from across the world. And it touched them at different times and I knew having said you know before that people sort of experience trauma and they experience processing of grief and other aspects of it at different times. Just this past week, I have had a flood of people actually reposting it and reading it for the first time like, “Oh my gosh this makes so much sense.” Which actually supports this delayed processing understanding, and so to segue into self-awareness, everybody’s going through it at a different time and I think the awareness that we lack on ourselves, is actually transferred to other people. We see this about other people all the time. It’s very easy to judge somebody else. It’s very easy to say, “Oh you know, you’re a close talker, I don’t like the way they do that in a meeting.” And then quickly tell a peer or a coworker, someone else or a partner, “I really don’t like it when this person does this at work.” But we fail to turn around and think, if I am thinking this and saying this about somebody, somebody is probably thinking and saying something about me. The opposite is rarely true. We rarely counter our own thinking with what our behavior actually is. And so, when you talk about “how do you know?” I try to practice that personally if I’m feeling this way about someone, I really question whether or not someone’s feeling this way about me and what that might mean. And I think starting there, starting with a practice of like counterbalancing your own thoughts on how you could be viewed, not just with the way someone else could be viewed, is a really helpful entry into practicing self-awareness not just subscribing to it. You have to generally subscribe to the concept. But it’s really hard to turn around and do it yourself. And the more you get into an application of how you’re thinking, versus how other people might be thinking about you, you will naturally become less judgmental and more accepting. And when you can through that lens become more accepting of your coworkers, of your team, of your boss, because your boss went through the same thing, right? You may not like what your boss is doing, but your boss went through the same thing. You may generally come to problems, resolutions and solutions in general with a very different framework and perspective that lowers the tension and the frustration for what it is, and actually allows you to talk about the real issue. So that’s sort of a way to think about the practice of it in a work experience. Because we have to do it ourselves — self-awareness is about us. My company doesn’t have a heartbeat. My company doesn’t have fingers. My company is run by people. And if you blame the organization, then you actually are missing an opportunity to resolve something much closer to you that can directly affect you and that is true for everyone. We are just people talking to people – that’s it. That’s what we are. We have to find a better way to actually have healthier conversations in order to move past the frustration that may lie underneath.

CC: So, Adria, this has been a great conversation. I feel like I could probably talk to you for a couple hours but I know that we don’t have that much time today. So I just want to say again, thank you for joining us. Thank you for your service and thank you for sharing what you’ve learned in all of your experiences.

AH: Thank you so much, Chris. I really appreciate it. I hope that you and all your listeners find some value and this resonates with somebody and helps them on whatever their resiliency journey is following this crazy pandemic. Thank you.

Chris Congdon: So joining us now is Nadia Johnson and Nadia is the Director of Leadership and Adaptive Teams here at Steelcase. She spends her time learning about how leadership is changing, and helping descale leadership training and coaching across the global organization. So thanks for being with me, Nadia.

Nadia Johnson: Thanks so much, Chris. Thanks for inviting me.

CC: I'm so glad to talk to you about this because I was really struck, first by Adria's article before we had a chance to interview her and then in the conversation with her. What I found so interesting was this idea that she connected our return to the office to her experience in the military with deployment and what it was like for military personnel to return from deployment. She talked about how there's an experience that is different for everybody, but it's a little predictable. They've done it enough and they have a structure in place to help people when they're coming back to cope with the change and the trauma that they've been through. So now we have a lot of employees that are coming back into the workplace and that was her point. And I'm just curious what you think about where we are going or where we could be going to help people make this transition from going through a big trauma to just get back to it – just get back to normal.

NJ: I love the way she made that connection. I think we've all talked about COVID a lot and it's this big thing that's happening. But it was this big different thing and there was no box to put it in and maybe what we should do, so I loved her connection because it does give this idea that there's a roadmap that we could follow. It's not all going about in the dark. I love that idea and I think it's really relevant. As I listened to her though, I remember thinking there is a similarity in terms of the big deployment and coming back. But that experience has some closure, and I think maybe one of the differences between the experience she's talking about and maybe what's also happening in the workforce is – where's our closure? Where are we? Are we in, are we out? Are we in an endemic? Pandemic? And I think that lack of closure is maybe what's creating an extra layer of struggle. But I think the experience is still very similar.

CC: I think it's so interesting to think about where we're at because I know there are a lot of people in leadership roles who might be like, "Let's just be done! Get over your trauma, people!" but really it was just such a life-changing event for so many people and I'm just curious how you think we could begin to help people cope with that. And what do leaders need to do to help people cope with that given that's kind of an area of expertise for you?

NJ: Well I love to be the expert, I wish I had all the answers. I'm not sure I do. But what I would say that what our own research within Steelcase is showing as we do some some work with leaders and understanding the needs of employees, and what the research out there is also telling us when I participate in different external forms to drill into leadership is right now probably the most important skill or trade a leader could practice is empathy. You can't just say "Get off the struggle bus," or "It's over, move on," and how do you really practice that? It's almost impossible to practice empathy if you don't have a relationship with someone. And some of our own internal data showing that one of the focus areas we need — and it's not unique to us, I think this would be outside this company's walls — and what the data shows is, how are you building those relationships across the teams that you're working with so that for folks who are on the struggle bus, they have opportunities to connect with each other, with you? And that's how they remain connected to the organization. People don't just bond to Steelcase. They bond to their leader and the team that they are part of. So this empathy factor becomes really incredibly important.

The other thing that we really coach leaders to do as we interact with them is when you're in a terrible moment one of the ways you can really focus and prime people is to really get them thinking about the future a little bit in a very hopeful way. Our data has shown, believe it or not, in the midst of all this, the things our employees are worried about and are wondering about are their future — "Where's my career going? What could be next?" And I think with the article that we're discussing, you see people are making choices to maybe leave because they're thinking about those things. And if you can help them see themselves where you are in the future and how that connects to their aspirations, both personal and in career, I think that's the role we need from our leaders.

CC: I was really interested in talking with her – she's very big into self awareness – and I was interested in asking the big question, "How do I know if I'm self aware? Am I just fooling myself?" I'm just curious what you think about this notion connecting what you were saying about empathy with self-awareness. Again, as a leader, I might think I'm empathetic, but maybe not so much. Or as an employee, I might think it's somebody else's fault that I feel this way but maybe not? I'm just curious, what do you think?

NJ: I mean I think she's on to something. Self-awareness plays a huge role, because if you can't make it through the experience and process it and find meaning in it for yourself. It's really going to be very difficult to recognize where someone's in the process of doing that, on the verge of doing that, or stuck and unable to do that. So I think what we've talked about with our leaders a lot during the pandemic is this idea of pausing and taking a moment to take care of yourself first. To do that processing that reflection to figure out where you are because unless you do that you really can't do that for someone else. I thought that was a really big selling point she made when she talked about that.

CC: I was also fascinated with this new role that she was exposed to in her military training and, I think it was at West Point, that as they were going through the training, they had a role that they called the Beast Counselor. Which personally, I just thought the name Best Counselor sound like a job I want to have because I want that on my business card, but the idea of the Beast Counselor is this person whose responsibility it is to stay in touch with, and in this case it was with students, the cadets, but thinking about that like kind in a corporate world, like to stay in touch with people and kind of keep your finger on the pulse of what's happening. I'm just curious – do you think? Should we have Beast Counselors in the workplace?

NJ: I don't know, I remember hearing her talk about that and I was intrigued by the idea. Because the part that's most appealing to me is that I could go to them in this moment of, "Yeah I think I want to quit my job," and not really put it out there. If I say that to my boss, who I have a great relationship with, now is she going to think I'm on the slow train or I want to exit the organization when I don't?

CC: Or you're quiet quitting.

NJ: Or quiet quitting — another one out there. So I was intrigued from that perspective. But I struggled mentally with, how do we make that happen? Because I feel like that's such an important role of a leader, to make that connection. In fact, it's almost that transcendent role. You know you're there if your employee could really have that conversation with you and it would just be in that moment and it wouldn't leave that mark or that stain. And so I struggled with that – could we do that? Is there a person who has that kind of capacity, inclination and could do it for all the people who need it right now? So practically that's what I struggled with because the structure was so different in the military, the way she talked about it. But I love the idea and I think it touches on a very real need for spaces like that. It gets back to that empathy piece right? Because when you're in the moment with someone and you're only there to be with them, you can do that and I think it releases you of that judgment that maybe sometimes comes with leadership because you have some other responsibilities as well that are more related to the organization. So I think that's what she was getting at mostly, right? Someone who is just there for the employee only, Without any other obligations and responsibilities or accountabilities in the greater organization. I'm talking myself into it as I think!

CC: Well I loved having a chance to chat with you, Nadia. This was really helpful to have somebody to kind of process through what we heard from Adria. So thanks for being here.

NJ: You're welcome. Thank you very much

CC: Thank you for being here with us for this episode of Work Better. If you enjoyed this conversation – please subscribe on your favorite podcast platform and visit us at steelcase.com/subscribe to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

Next week – we're talking to Kenny Clewett. Kenny works with Ashoka. Ashoka is a global organization with a mission to mobilize a movement where everyone is a changemaker in the world. Kenny joins us from Spain to share how organizations can find changemakers. What makes them so special and valuable to companies? And how thinking about our communities outside of our office walls can actually strengthen our communities inside the workplace. We hope you'll join us next week.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.